



Addressing Barriers to English Language Learning: Insights from Teachers in a Rural West Nusa Tenggara School

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Abstract

This study examines the barriers to English language learning in rural Indonesian school, with focus on a Junior High School in Sumbawa Island. Using a qualitative method, data were collected through interviews and classroom observations. Thematic analysis revealed several key barriers, including low student motivation, inadequate learning resources, challenges with pronunciation, limited exposure to English, and restricted vocabulary development. These obstacles impede students' proficiency in English, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. In response, teachers have implemented innovative strategies such as 1) Enhancing student motivation and engagement; 2) Utilizing teacher's voice for listening activities; 3) Incorporating body language and gestures to facilitate understanding

Keywords: *English Language Learning; Rural Education; Teachers' Strategies; Learning Barriers; Student Motivation; Learning Resources*

Introduction

For a long time, educational problems with English language learning in rural areas have made it difficult for students to become fluent in the language, especially in Indonesia. In Indonesia, studying English as a foreign language has become an essential part of the curriculum. Being a universal language, English is crucial for students to learn in order to communicate and access a multitude of worldwide chances and information (Sebsibe et al., 2023). The Indonesian government has worked hard to incorporate English language instruction into the national curriculum because it understands how important it is to speak and understand the language (Millner, 2021). Teaching English become more difficult since most students are uninterested in learning English and are only concerned with passing the course. Even more, students are unwilling and unmotivated to learn English because they do not see the urgency needed to use the language. In addition, the phenomena about teaching are getting worse in school located in rural area.

Indonesia confronts particular challenges in offering equal education to its diverse and often isolated rural areas. English language education in rural areas continues to face serious challenges, including inadequate facilities, limited access to competent teachers, and a lack of instructional resources. Addressing these barriers is essential for ensuring equitable access to high-quality English language education. According to a World Bank report (2018), educational gaps in Indonesia disproportionately

affect rural areas, with children from these areas performing less wealthy academically than those from urban areas. These disparities are particularly evident in English language education, where rural students commonly struggle to meet national criteria for English competence. In Indonesia, despite the fact that the majority of students are more proficient in their regional languages, many rural schools still employ Indonesian as the primary language of teaching. Students' academic performance is impacted by this language barrier since it frequently makes it difficult for them to understand the lesson material (BPS, 2020). Additionally, it hinders teacher-student collaboration, which lowers student interest in the learning process.

The standard of English education is uncertain in rural areas. Teaching and studying English is not at its best in rural areas. Students in rural schools have less opportunity to study English than those in metropolitan institutions. The information that is accessible concerning English is extremely limited. Consequently, learners lack passion for learning English because they are not proficient in the language in their everyday lives. Even after years of study, the majority of students still does not understand, avoid, or react appropriately to the process of learning a foreign language, and only a small percentage of students have successfully used a variety of strategies and comprehended English teachings. In addition, teaching and learning have become more challenging in rural schools by additional challenges such inadequate facilities for instructional activities (Febriana et al., 2018). In light of the aforementioned issue, English teachers in rural areas need to be worried and come up with solutions for a variety of issues. As a result English education in rural schools poses difficulties for teachers.

In addition to a lack of EFL proficiency, these barriers also include a lack of enthusiasm, restricted study times, inadequate teaching resources, and low student motivation (Malik et al., 2021). Students thus lack interest for learning English because they do not know it well in their everyday lives. Andjani et al., (2024) state that one of the main issues is that students have a "fear of making mistakes," which lowers their speaking confidence. This fear is made worse by cultural attitudes that discourage mistakes, which makes students reluctant to participate in class activities. Students' limited vocabulary also makes it more difficult for them to communicate their ideas and thoughts clearly. The differences in English language learning between rural and urban students highlight a larger issue of educational inequality. Poedjiastutie (2021) stated that English teachers have difficulties to implementing the student-centered approach due to limited teaching resources, media, exposure, and distribution of compulsory textbooks so that it takes up quite a lot of time for teachers who have to write and read texts with exercises on the blackboard.

In many schools, particularly in rural areas, teachers may lack proper English training or competency, resulting in ineffective teaching practices and a lower level of language instruction (Akinwamide & Oguntade, 2023). Furthermore, the availability of learning materials such as textbooks, audiovisual aids, and language labs is frequently limited, reducing students' ability to study effectively. Learning English in rural schools presents greater challenges than in urban areas due to limited resources and media (Supriadi et al., 2023). Addressing this issue ensures equal access to quality education for every student, regardless of location. Many parents in rural areas do not put much emphasis on their children's education, especially in learning English, it would be better to learn math, science or social studies; because they are seen as investments that can yield better economic returns (Becker, 1964).

Additionally, English is unfamiliar to most students, as it is only introduced in schools. Many students primarily use their traditional languages, requiring teachers to communicate in regional languages and Bahasa to facilitate learning. Furthermore, students often lack awareness of English's importance, making motivation a key challenge for teachers in rural schools. When teaching English as a foreign language, it becomes a critical issue (Khan, 2021), as it is difficult to teach English as a foreign language in settings where English is not widely spoken. Zulaeha and Riyanti (2024) identified two main challenges faced by the teacher in teaching English in rural area: (1) teacher-related issues, and (2) student-related issues. Teachers related issues include long travel distances, teaching multiple subjects,

and limited training. Meanwhile, students-related issues involve low interest, lack of confidence, poor vocabulary mastery, and irregular attendance.

Previous studies share a common focus on language barriers in English language learning, particularly in rural and underserved educational setting (e.g. Syahabuddin, 2025; Deswalantri et al. 2024; Qazi, 2023). Language learning barriers found in those studies are the limited exposure to English outside of the classroom, limited access, disparities in teacher proficiency and educational resources, language differences pose in the classroom, and psychological barriers like anxiety and lack of confidence all negatively impact students' language acquisition.

While those previous studies have explored various aspects of language barriers in English language learning, there remains a gap in research specifically addressing these challenges within the context of rural Indonesian schools, particularly at SMPN 2 Plampang. This gap underscores the need for a more localized investigation into how language barriers affect English learning in a specific rural school setting. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this gap by examining the unique challenges faced by students and teachers at SMPN 2 Plampang.

1. What are the language learning barriers facing learners in rural areas of Plampang District?
2. What strategies do teachers use to overcome those barriers?

Methodology

A. Research Design

The study was conducted in SMPN 2 Plampang. This research is use qualitative approach with single case study. It is kind of research method that involves the collection of data for the purpose of describing existing condition. According to Creswell (2014), a case study gives scholars the opportunity to comprehend, examine, and research an ongoing situation in order to learn more about it. This study aims to investigate the English Language Learning Barriers and how to address that barrier.

B. Research Participants

The participants in this study were 6 students and two English teachers of SMPN 2 Plampang. They were selected purposively. The 6 students selected consisted of 2 students from each grade (i.e. grade 1, 2, 3). The two English teachers involved as participants in the study were selected due to the fact that they were the only English teachers teaching at the school.

C. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, as well as classroom observations at SMPN2 Plampang, Sumbawa. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and teachers, allowing the researcher to gather additional information that may be valuable to the study. Classroom observations were employed to examine teaching practices, student engagement, and the use of learning resources or media in real-time.

D. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the data collected from the observations and interviews. This method involved identifying, analyzing, and summarizing patterns (themes) in the data. After transcribing all interviews and field notes from the classroom observations, the information was categorized into themes related to language barriers and potential strategies for overcoming them.

Findings and Discussions

Findings

Thematic analysis of the collected data revealed several key themes regarding English language learning barriers in rural school education at Sumbawa Island, as well as the strategies employed by teachers to mitigate these barriers. The analysis of the data collected from interviews and classroom observations is described below.

1) Lack of Student Motivation

Many students perceive English merely as a subject they need to pass rather than a valuable skill for their future. Teachers reported that students have little foundational knowledge of English, requiring them to start with the basics such as learning the alphabet and numbers. Additionally, students often lack confidence and fear making mistakes, which further hinders their willingness to actively participate in class. This also state by student C “translating the language is difficult and last is I have no confidence in pronouncing words in English”. The teachers also said that a lot of the students feel unmotivated, as teacher A said “the biggest challenge is the students who still do not have motivation and passion in learning English. No one motivated the students to learn English. And they have no basic at all, so I have to teach them from the basic, like ABC and number. So I have to give them a lot of motivation to make them keeps wanting to learn”. Additionally, the teacher also state “The difficulties experienced by students are when they have to learn new vocabulary in English and also the lack of interest of students to learn English because of their lack of motivation which makes it difficult for teachers to teach them”.

2) Insufficient Learning Resources and Facilities

The study found that students often share textbooks due to a limited supply, and there are no multimedia tools such as projectors, speakers, or flashcards to support interactive learning. Classroom observations confirmed that teaching is primarily board-based, restricting opportunities for engaging lessons. This lack of resources forces teachers to rely on traditional, less interactive methods, which do not always effectively support students' learning needs. Learning resources are only textbooks from school, dictionaries brought by ourselves. The students state “There is no other media besides that. The dominant one is the textbook, does not use other media. I think if there is visual media it would be better and audio to do the listening session”. All of the students said the same things; the only things they use to study are books and dictionary.

3) Difficulty with Pronunciation

Pronunciation is one of the most challenging aspects of learning English, especially for students in rural areas where exposure to spoken English is minimal. Many Indonesian learners struggle with pronouncing English words correctly due to differences between the phonetic systems of English and their native language. According to student A “It's difficult because I don't really understand; it is so hard to say the words”. Student B also said the same thing “the difficult is when we write the words and read or say the words”. Pronunciation difficulties arise when students encounter unfamiliar sounds that do not exist in their first language. For example, Indonesian students often mispronounce sounds like /θ/ (as in think) and /ð/ (as in this), as these sounds are absent in the Indonesian language. According to the student D “The writing is the same; the way of reading is different, make it hard to read and pronounce it”. Classroom observations at SMPN 2 Plampang confirm this, as students primarily use Indonesian and Sumbawa languages, only speaking English when required by the teacher. Without consistent listening exposure, students find it difficult to imitate correct pronunciation patterns.

4) Limited English Exposure

Based on the interview result, all the students answered that they were rarely hear or use English at home or in their community, as their daily activities, such as helping parents in the fields, do not involve English usage. Classroom observations showed that students predominantly communicate in Indonesian and Sumbawa language, using English only when directly instructed by their teachers. This lack of language exposure limits their ability to develop confidence and fluency in English. According to teacher A “because the environment in which students live every day is not very familiar with foreign languages, so learning English is a lesson that is not very important for some people who live in rural area, so it is difficult for us to teach students at school because of their lack of knowledge and they do not learn anything else other than at school”. Additionally, teacher B state that “Students only learn English at school in the classroom and not when they get home because they are busy helping their parents in the fields or in the rice fields and also they are not very interested in learning English which makes it increasingly difficult for us to teach them at school because of the limited media for learning, limited student interest, limited learning resources and also the lack of exposure to English in the rural area”.

5) Limited Vocabulary

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language learning, and students with a limited vocabulary often struggle to express themselves effectively in English. Teacher B “I think it’s difficult due to the lack of the learning resources and the students lack of vocabulary, so it is hard to teach them, especially when they do not have interest in learning English”. Since students primarily use their native language at home and in daily interactions, they have fewer opportunities to practice and reinforce new words. Another factor contributing to vocabulary limitations is the lack of learning resources. As noted by Qazi (2023), rural schools often have insufficient textbooks, dictionaries, and reading materials, making it harder for students to expand their word knowledge. This aligns with findings at SMPN 2 Plampang, where students reported relying on limited school-provided textbooks and rarely encountering English outside class. Student C state “Difficult to memorize words, vocabulary, word order, spelling of the word and reading are different, translating the language is difficult and last is I have no confidence in pronouncing words in English”.

To overcome the barriers teachers employed several strategies explicated bellow.

1) Enhancing Student Motivation and Engagement

One of the main barriers identified in this study was the lack of motivation among students in learning English. Many students struggle to see the relevance of English in their daily lives, leading to low engagement and reluctance to participate in class. Teacher A highlighted the importance of fostering motivation, stating, “The first thing that I do is to motivate the students so that they can be brave to say something in the class.” This reflects the need to create a supportive and encouraging learning environment where students feel confident enough to express themselves in English. Additionally, another teacher emphasized the significant lack of intrinsic motivation, explaining, “The biggest challenge is the students who still do not have motivation and passion for learning English. No one motivates the students to learn English, so I have to give them a lot of motivation to make them keeps wanting to learn.” This statement underscores the crucial role of teachers in inspiring students and maintaining their interest in language learning. Without proper encouragement, students may struggle to find the drive to improve their English skills.

2) Utilizing Teacher's Voice for Listening Activities

In many rural schools, limited access to multimedia resources poses a challenge for conducting listening exercises. To address this, teachers often use their own voices to model pronunciation and intonation patterns. This approach ensures that students are exposed to accurate language sounds, even in the absence of audio equipment. As teacher A state “So the only thing I can do is ask them to write and memorize some words because it is not need any other media and because of limited learning media such as the unavailability of speakers for listening classes or audio for listening classes and also language labs and the absence of media that can be used for visual media, so the method I use is to use my own voice for listening classes”. By actively engaging students in listening and repetition exercises, educators can enhance auditory discrimination skills and improve overall language comprehension. By using reading aloud the teacher manage to keep doing the listening classes. As noted by Hamruni (2009) and supported by Suryani and Wibowo (2019), the use of interactive teaching strategy is highlighted by the use of reading aloud to enhance pronunciation and listening abilities as well as pair discussions followed by presentations. This method is particularly beneficial in settings where technological resources are scarce, ensuring that listening practice remains an integral part of language instruction.

3) Incorporating Body Language and Gestures

Understanding and using body language can significantly aid in vocabulary acquisition and overall communication skills. Teachers employ gestures and facial expressions to convey the meanings of new words, providing visual cues that help students grasp and remember vocabulary more effectively. This technique aligns with the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, which connects vocabulary and phrases to physical actions or gestures, facilitating better retention and recall. Research indicates that iconic gestures, which visually represent the meaning of words, can serve as effective tools for learning vocabulary in a foreign language, especially when these gestures align with the words' meanings. According to teacher A “then use body language when explaining a new word or vocabulary to students so that students understand what the word means”. By integrating body language into lessons, educators can create a multisensory learning experience that enhances understanding and retention of new language concepts.

Discussion

This section discusses these challenges in relation to existing literature and explores strategies that have been implemented to address them.

One of the key findings of this study is that students lack motivation and interest in learning English. Motivation is a critical factor in language learning, and rural students often struggle with low interest in English due to a perceived lack of relevance. Recent studies have shown that motivation significantly influences language learning success. For instance, Bai, B., & Zang, X. (2025) study found a positive correlation between learning motivation and engagement among students in bilingual contexts. Masluha, siti. (2025) study highlighted that students' language attitudes and English proficiency are greatly improved by learning motivation, defined by interest levels, learning goals, and effort. The findings at SMPN 2 Plampang confirm this, as both teachers and students expressed concerns over low enthusiasm and fear of making mistakes. The hardest thing for an English language instructor in rural Indonesia, is dealing with pupils who don't even care, who don't have the fundamental knowledge and skills needed to start the class, or who give up and become distracted easily. This aligns with Malik et al. (2021), who found that rural students often struggle to engage with English learning due to limited exposure and minimal real-world application. Teachers reported that they must constantly motivate students, as many have little to no foundational knowledge.

According to the World Bank (2018), educational disparities in Indonesia disproportionately affect rural areas, leading to unequal access to learning materials and technology. The findings at SMPN 2 Plampang indicate that students often share textbooks due to limited supplies, and teachers rely on board-based teaching with minimal multimedia support. This limits interactive and student-centered learning opportunities, making lessons less engaging. The lack of essential resources like flashcards, projectors, and audio tools further hinders student comprehension and listening skills. Poedjiastutie (2021) emphasized that rural schools often face significant difficulties in delivering engaging lessons due to insufficient materials, which aligns with the experiences reported by teachers at SMPN 2 Plampang.

Pronunciation remains a major obstacle for students in rural areas, primarily due to limited exposure to spoken English. The findings revealed that students struggle with phonetic differences between English and Indonesian, making it difficult to pronounce certain words accurately. Supriadi et al. (2023) highlighted that poor internet access in rural schools further limits students' ability to access pronunciation tools, leaving them solely dependent on their teachers. A study by Sajjah et al. (2023) highlighted that teachers' nonverbal behaviors in the classroom, including pronunciation modeling, significantly influence students' motivation, engagement, and learning. Classroom observations at SMPN 2 Plampang confirmed that students primarily use Indonesian and Sumbawa languages, restricting their opportunities to practice English pronunciation.

Students at SMPN 2 Plampang have minimal opportunities to hear or use English outside the classroom, which significantly impacts their ability to develop fluency and confidence in speaking. In rural areas, the dominant use of native languages in daily communication limits students' exposure to English, making it challenging for them to practice and retain what they learn in school. According to BPS (2020), rural students struggle to develop fluency due to a lack of English-speaking environments, as English is rarely used in their homes, communities, and social interactions. Unlike urban students, who may have more access to English-language media, extracurricular activities, and interactions with proficient speakers, rural students often have limited exposure to authentic English input, which is crucial for developing listening comprehension and speaking skills. Moreover, the findings of Zulaeha and Riyanti (2024) indicate that students in rural areas often use their native languages exclusively, making English feel foreign and disconnected from their reality. Since students do not see English as a part of their everyday lives, they struggle to retain vocabulary, understand grammatical structures, and develop natural speech patterns.

A strong vocabulary is essential for effective language use, yet many students at SMPN 2 Plampang struggle with memorizing and using new words. As noted by Qazi (2023), rural schools frequently lack sufficient reading materials, making it difficult for students to expand their vocabulary. According to Poedjiastutie (2021), vocabulary acquisition is particularly challenging when students lack interest in language learning and have minimal access to engaging reading materials. Teachers at SMPN 2 Plampang confirmed that their students rely almost exclusively on school-provided textbooks and dictionaries, limiting their ability to expand their vocabulary effectively.

To mitigate the barriers faced in English language learning, teachers at SMPN 2 Plampang have adopted several strategies, such as Enhancing student motivation and engagement, this is crucial in fostering a positive learning environment where students not only participate actively but also develop a genuine interest in learning English. By implementing engaging and interactive teaching strategies, teachers can help students overcome reluctance and develop a sense of curiosity and enthusiasm toward the language. These methods align with Ryan & Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which states that learners are more engaged and motivated when they experience a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When students perceive learning English as meaningful and personally relevant, they are more likely to put in effort and sustain their motivation over time.

Using Teacher's Voice for Listening Practice – Due to the lack of audio resources, teachers use their own voices for dictation, pronunciation drills, and listening exercises. Without access to recorded materials, teachers read aloud texts and dialogues, allowing students to familiarize themselves with proper pronunciation, stress patterns, and intonation. This strategy is supported by Nation & Newton (2009), who suggest that oral-based classrooms can effectively develop listening comprehension through structured listening activities. By consistently repeating words and phrases, teachers help students improve their listening comprehension skills. Additionally, question-and-answer sessions based on spoken material provide students with opportunities to practice responding to spoken English, reinforcing both their listening and speaking abilities. Teachers also conduct echo reading activities, where students repeat words or sentences after the teacher, helping them internalize correct pronunciation.

The self-involvement explanation posits that gestures promote participant engagement in the learning task, enhancing attention and favoring FL vocabulary acquisition (Helstrup, 1987). According to Bäckman et al. (1986) this increase in attention is primarily attributed to heightened attentional and perceptual processing due to the execution of gestures or the use of objects to recreate actions. Incorporating body language and gestures helps students understand vocabulary and concepts, teachers use physical gestures, facial expressions, and movements. This method aligns with Total Physical Response (TPR), which enhances retention by associating words with actions. For example, when teaching action verbs, teachers demonstrate the movement while saying the word, such as mimicking running when saying “run” or pointing to an object while saying its name. This multisensory approach helps students memorize vocabulary more effectively, as they can link meaning to physical motion. This method is grounded in Asher's (1969) Total Physical Response (TPR) approach, which argues that pairing language with movement improves comprehension and retention. The use of gestures also helps students understand abstract terms by providing visual reinforcement to spoken explanations. Incorporating body language and gestures helps students grasp vocabulary and language structures, teachers use gestures, facial expressions, and physical movements as instructional tools. This multisensory approach not only helps students understand new words but also reduces anxiety and builds confidence in speaking.

Conclusion

This study concludes that English language learning in rural schools, particularly at SMPN 2 Plampang, is hindered by low student motivation, insufficient learning resources, pronunciation difficulties, minimal English exposure, and limited vocabulary acquisition. These challenges highlight systemic issues in rural education that restrict students' ability to develop English proficiency. However, teachers have adopted innovative strategies, including using their voices for listening practice, incorporating body language for vocabulary development, and promoting peer learning, to overcome these barriers. Without continued intervention and support, these barriers will continue to affect students' academic performance and future opportunities.

Future research should explore the long-term effectiveness of the strategies implemented by teachers in rural schools to determine which methods yield the best results for improving English language proficiency. Additionally, comparative studies between rural and urban schools could provide valuable insights into the specific needs of rural students and how tailored educational policies can address them. Researchers should also examine the role of technology and mobile learning applications in overcoming English learning barriers, particularly in schools with limited resources.

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